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Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly on the Implementation of the Outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and Further Initiatives
First session
New York, 17–28 May 1999
Items 3 and 4 of the provisional agenda*
Preliminary review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development

Consideration of further actions and initiatives to implement the commitments made at the Summit

Contributions by relevant organs, funds and programmes, and specialized agencies of the United Nations system

Note by the Secretariat

Addendum

Contribution from the United Nations Volunteers Programme

The Secretariat circulates herewith for the information of the Preparatory Committee the attached report of the United Nations Volunteers Programme, which is available in English.

* A/AC.253/5.

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Annex

1. Unprecedented changes in the economic, social and political spheres are bringing benefits to some and increased marginalization and impoverishment to many others. A beacon in the struggle to address poverty concerns is the spectacular growth in the past decade of both organized and spontaneous volunteer responses. In this context, at its 50th plenary meeting on 20 November 1997 in resolution A/RES/52/17 the General Assembly decided to welcome the recommendation of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) contained in its resolution 1997/44 of 22 July 1997 to proclaim 2001 the International Year of Volunteers (IYV). The decision was co-sponsored by 123 countries. The text of the ECOSOC resolution noted the importance of new players taking initiatives at the local, national and international levels, particularly individuals and organizations of civil society, in partnership with Governments, as emphasized in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development.

2. The ECOSOC resolution designated the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) as the focal point for preparations, implementation and follow-up of the Year in close collaboration with other organizations of the United Nations system. It also encouraged UNV to continue the process of close collaboration and partnership with Governments and international volunteer and non-governmental organizations, in particular, with regard to the preparations for and the implementation of the Year.

3. Volunteer service has been a part of virtually every civilization. Defined in its broadest terms as the contribution that individuals make as non-profit, non-wage, and non-career action for the well-being of their neighbour, community or society at large, it takes many forms, from traditional customs of mutual self-help to community coping responses in times of crisis, and spearheading effort for relief, conflict resolution and the eradication of poverty.

4. Volunteerism has come to play a significant part in the welfare and progress of industrialized and developing countries and is the basis of much of the activity of non-governmental organizations, professional associations, trade unions, decentralized government services, etc. In many countries the presence of volunteers is central to the provision of basic services in such areas as health and nutrition; primary, secondary and remedial education and basic literacy; family planning; and the provision of low cost housing, recreation and cultural facilities. This contribution helps to build-up local ownership. It also goes largely unrecorded. In the few instances where volunteer action

has been measured empirically, the results reveal a level of support to society which bears little relationship to the limited consideration given at the macro level to the impact of policy measures on the willingness of individuals to volunteer their time, and their ability to do so.

5. The contribution of volunteers extends, however, far beyond measurable quantitative indicators. There is also a vital qualitative contribution. At the heart of volunteering is the notion of engagement and of solidarity which, taken together, provide the cement that reinforces any caring society. There is a critical link between the level of citizen action and economic and social development.

6. Volunteering is central to the process of social integration and participation. It channels much needed support to vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups. It also provides a channel for marginalized groups to gain access to the skills acquired, the knowledge and experience accumulated, and the satisfaction derived from the act of volunteering. As such, volunteer work becomes an act of self-empowerment for the individual. The Copenhagen Declaration and the Programme for Action call for a series of responses which, together, will reinforce the means and capacities of people in a variety of social groups with special needs to participate in social and economic programmes. There are a range of actions which Governments can take to enhance the environment within which citizens are able to volunteer time to assist others. IYV 2001 provides a unique occasion to take steps towards this end.

7. UNV, in its capacity as focal point for IYV 2001, has convened a series of meetings of governments, the UN system and non-government organizations to discuss the steps needed to ensure a successful Year. These have been geared towards identifying the nature of initiatives which can help ensure the highest profile for the Year and which will promote the broadest participation focusing particularly on population groups who are not touched by volunteering. A Guidance Note is being issued which describes the types of activities which the public, private and voluntary sector can take in relation to the Year. A brochure and poster is being distributed globally. A dedicated web site has been created providing an opportunity for individuals and organizations to exchange ideas on volunteering and plans for IYV 2001. A group of eminent persons and an ad hoc consultative committee comprised of some of the largest volunteer using agencies around the world are being formed. Consultations with individual Governments and UN agencies continue while many non-governmental organizations, spreading from ones with millions of members to community groups of a few hundred, are now discussing what IYV 2001 can help achieve for their organizations and developing action plans accordingly.

8. The WSSD follow-up process will be much enriched by incorporating volunteering as one of the primary mechanisms to help promote social integration of all

population groups. UNV is striving, through the planning and implementation of IYV 2001, to contribute to the attainment of targets set at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995. It is to be hoped that at the Special Session of the General Assembly in June 2000 the decision of the international community to designate an International Year dedicated to volunteering will be seized as a unique opportunity to recognize and build on this valuable facet of every society.